Re-(W)righting Black Male Subjectivity: The Communal Poetics of Ernest Gaines's "A Gathering of Old Men"
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RE-(W)RIGHTING BLACK MALE SUBJECTIVITY
The Communal Poetics of Ernest Gaines’s A Gathering of Old Men

by Keith Clark

When I think of Gaines, I think of voice and story. . . . I think of a person talking to me. I think of men and women talking to me. I think of voices that carry through time. I think of history and personal life memory.
—Gayl Jones, Interview with Michael Harper

It’s not between the character and the writer. It’s the voice, not the person himself, but the voice. . . . When I come to the omniscient point of view and I create a character, a narrator who’s much like myself, I do too much thinking. I don’t have the freedom. That’s one of the things I criticize Invisible Man about. There’s too much thinking going on all the time. There’s thinking in every goddamned sentence. You don’t think. Let the thing flow. Let it go.
—Ernest Gaines

The collective writings of Ernest Gaines have challenged and critiqued literary and cultural constructions of the black male subject. As the epigraphic “reading” of Ralph Ellison suggests, Gaines is not satisfied with earlier “blueprints” for “Negro” men’s writing: throughout his career, he has foregrounded the differences between his work and that of his literary forebrothers, most notably Richard Wright and Ellison. By centering the experiences of black men within a certain cultural context, Gaines’s novels and short stories reveal a consanguineous if not harmonious relationship between his and Wright’s writings, which revolved around a debilitated male subject—one rendered disabled and disfigured by the scourges of racism and classism.

Indeed, most of Gaines’s fiction (the notable exception being his 1973 novel The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman) charts black men’s attempts to re-situate themselves as subjects—a liberating domain where they attain some degree of agency, self-definition, and authority amidst an abnegating southern environment. Because he and Wright share common geographic place, the different fictive spaces they configure are made even more marked. From early works such as Bloodline (1968) to his latest novel A Lesson Before Dying (1993), the author has embarked upon a re-figuring of the black male literary subject: his protagonists depart substantially from the psychologically and culturally mutilated Bigger Thomas of Wright’s 1940 classic Native Son.
I.

Of course, any discussion of black men’s literary discourse that examines protest writing and subsequent artists’ critique of it must take into consideration social and cultural dynamics. Wright’s insistence on a deformed black male subject reflected what he considered the cultural evisceration of black men; his introduction to Native Son, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” lays the groundwork for the maimed male subject that permeates his fiction. However, what is so intriguing about the work of Ernest Gaines generally, and his 1984 novel A Gathering of Old Men specifically, is its radical insistence on black men challenging and interrupting their seemingly inexorable victimhood. Though many critics have discussed Gaines’s centering of male rituals and the integral role storytelling and voice play in his fiction, I posit that Gaines’s artistic accomplishments have even more salient implications vis-à-vis the protest tradition, which Wright epitomizes.

I will illustrate how Gaines’s aesthetic endeavor involves the re-centering not merely of the black male voice, but of a black male communal voice which contrasts sharply with the mono-voicedness of protest discourse. In A Gathering of Old Men, Gaines’s re-examination and reinscription of black masculinity result in a revised representation of black literary subjectivity. Specifically, the author deconstructs the notion that black masculinity is merely derivative, and he simultaneously demonstrates that voice and story function not only as fictive tropes but as viable vehicles for the transformation of the black male self. This essay argues that Gaines’s relationship with the protest tradition is more countertextual than intertextual: he appropriates but also subverts discursive features of protest fiction in order to center the empowering nature of communal storytelling and storylistening in terms of black male agency and subject formation.

II.

In light of Trudier Harris’ trenchant observation that “There is much more of a tendency among black male writers to use their characters in the thematic illustrations of problems in the society” (192, emphasis added), it is not surprising that “protest literature” remains the discursive category for African-American men’s writings, especially between the 1930s and 1960s. Unequivocally, Native Son emblemsizes the tradition: the plethora of books and articles it has stimulated attests to its centrality in the American/African-American canon, and it continues to inform writing by and about black males in the 1990s. However, the black protest tradition has become a realm of contention among many post-1960 male writers. Novelist Charles Johnson, for example, consigns most black men’s writing before and since 1970 to this category, and he assails it for jejunely telling the “same story” (74).

Moreover, Gaines repudiates its influence vis-à-vis his own Louisiana upbringing and the genesis of his literary voice:
One can clearly detect an anxiety of influence in Gaines’s rendering of his fictive modus operandi: as he does with Ellison, he clearly “reads” Wright and locates his own bucolic experiences as his artistic locus; simultaneously, he eschews violence as the sine qua non for black men’s writing and thereby deconstructs the key component of black masculinist protest writing. Well within the “signifying” tradition, Gaines therefore “tropes” both Wright and Ellison not merely in the novel’s title—A Gathering of Old Men connoting ceremony, maturity, and community as opposed to the isolation, dependency, and absence which Native Son and Invisible Man suggest—but more discernibly through his revision of black protagonists’ relationship to voice and the formal strategies he deploys to reify the voice-community-subjectivity nexus.4

Perhaps the most salient discursive feature of 1940s protest writing is its insistence on a de-formed black male subject, whose desires are totally informed by exogenous social constructs and institutions. The protest subject is defined primarily by physical and psychological absence and alienation—the subject’s existence as lacking in terms of white hegemonic culture. Bigger craves his slice of the American pie not based on its intrinsic worth, but solely because bourgeois, commodity American culture—and white men—denies him the objects that it valorizes and fetishizes. The protest subject therefore exists as a cipher, forever under erasure. The black community represents an unwilling but culpable accomplice in the black man’s disintegration, for it fails to comprehend the extent of his plight; instead, it measures him against a myopic and culturally incorrect narrative of white masculinity.

Gaines inscribes an antipodal narrative in A Gathering of Old Men, where white masculinity is not the benchmark for black men’s subjectivity. One narratological feature of protest discourse is the protagonist’s and author’s interlocking quests for authority, which result in a sort of battle royal between writer and protagonist. Bigger’s inculcation of the tenets of white masculinity mirrors Wright’s own immersion in discourses such as naturalism and Marxism; what results is a “dialogic” conflict reminiscent of Frederick Douglass’s attempts to situate his tale within a framework of American “success” narratives in his Narrative, with the requisite testimonial-like prefaces by two white male abolitionists. By utilizing first person male narrators and their unique personal histories (see Gaines’s prefatory comment on Ellison), narrators who are not surrogates for the author himself, Gaines effectively de-centers his own authorial voice and re-centers the voices of the heretofore silenced black old men. By foregrounding orality, storytelling, and storylistening as the
matrices of black male subjectivity, Gaines de-emphasizes the sanctioned of Western/American modes of narrative discourse and definitions of masculinity as black men’s primary conduits for empowerment and wholeness. Obviously, definitions of black masculinity and its broader white western counterpart are conterminous. Many critics have theorized the construction of black masculinity\(^5\); a recent work by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson (a sociologist and a psychologist, respectively) lucidly addresses how black men transform themselves into “gendered subjects.”\(^6\) The authors first adduce that

Historically, racism and discrimination have inflicted a variety of harsh injustices on African-Americans in the United States, especially on males. Being black and male has meant being psychologically castrated—rendered impotent in economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated. Black men learned long ago that the classic American virtues of thrift, perseverance, and hard work did not give them the same tangible rewards that accrued to whites. (1)

This standard delineation of black men’s inability to conform to prototypically “American” definitions of masculinity captures the *raison d’être* of protest masculinist discourse, which depicts black men as victims of a culture that does not bestow upon them the “privileges” of white manhood. Absent, of course, is a problematizing (if not a condemnation) of the very terms that figures such as Bigger—and Wright—have inculcated unequivocally. Yet, as Majors and Billson assert,

> African-American men have defined manhood in terms familiar to white men: breadwinner, provider, procreator, protector. Unlike white men, however, blacks have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success. Many have become frustrated, angry, embittered, alienated, and impatient. Some have learned to mistrust the words and actions of the dominant culture. (1)

The authors could very well have been diagnosing the personalities of Wright, Bigger, or Invisible Man. What happens to a dream deferred? Black men’s protest writing of the 1940s and 1950s insists that the psychic and physical implosion of the black male self is foreordained.

Alternatively, the power of *A Gathering of Old Men* lies not only in its reconceptualization of black masculinity, but in its eloquent critique of standard constructions of subjectivity. If fierce individualism, economic independence, isolation, hypersexuality, and violence emblematize American masculinity, then Gaines’s novel performs not only literary discursive work, but also significant cultural work as well. Perhaps because Gaines is less concerned with anachronistic constructions of maleness, he centers voicedness and the collective retelling of black men’s (hi)stories as his novel’s subject. At the core of the novel’s agon is a concern with black men who are not obsessed with inter- or intra-racial struggle (though decades of wanton white
violence catalyze the “gathering”), but who are instead in conflict with their own selves; thus, Gaines foregrounds the power of the black speech community as an alternative vehicle for black men’s subjectivity.

The most critical aspect of Gaines’s resituating of the subject is not only the centrality of voice and voicedness, but of storytelling and storylistening. As Gaines’s own earlier comments suggested, a fertile black speech community spawned and ignited his fictive imagination. The author’s concentration on black spoken discourse and the rituals it animates separates him further from the discourse of protest, which narratologically reflects mono- or double-voicedness and limits points of view to an “outraged” black male victim and/or his authorial counterpart. John Callahan’s point about the storytelling event in Gaines is instructive: “Unlike Ellison’s character/narrator, the people Gaines invests with the rights and responsibilities of storytelling do not undergo a transition from speaker to writer, from oral to literary tradition” (88). Indeed, the novel dramatizes the “transferential” or the organic and suturing power of storytelling and storylistening. Therefore, black male oracy is the novel’s focal point, as opposed to innumerable abuses which imperil and marginalize the protest protagonist. Because he foregrounds the curative function of voicedness—not black men’s attempts to in Wright’s own words “get white men to listen” and thereby validate and authenticate their lives—Gaines inverts and/or subverts the fictive machinery behind Wright’s and Ellison’s work. By situating black men within a gendered community, a primarily (though not exclusively) male milieu where they maintain the responsibility for witnessing and testifying to and for each other, the author further signifies on one of the key facets of protest discourse: the privileging of a singularly damaged and debilitated male subject who exists in diametric opposition to a potentially empowering group of black people.

Therefore, to recapitulate my central claim, Gaines’s storycentric discourse interrupts, disrupts, and demythologizes standard literary and cultural figurations of black male subjectivity: central to his aesthetic apparatus is a radical reenvisioning of what constitutes “masculinity.” Black men engaging in intimate acts of storytelling and listening catapults Gathering into the realm of “speakerly text,” where a polyphony of voices conveys not only individual and collective pain, but also resistance and transcendence. As Charles Rowell articulately observes, “These old men’s recollections are a choral litany for the quarters; their voices merge as a kind of contemporary chorus recounting physical and psychological violence done them and their immediate families, as the list of wrongs they cite reverberates down the centuries” (747). But as significant as the characters’ verbal remembering of things past is the author’s discursive act of intervention, where the storytelling event, the granting of black men the voice and authority to speak of the heretofore unspeakable, becomes a major contribution to post-1970s black masculinist literary discourse.

III.

Though I am arguing that Gaines ultimately deviates from the discursive formations specific to protest writing, ostensibly he imbues his fiction with situations that
recall Wright’s prose: clearly, he is a descendant of Wright and Ellison, and not a radical post-modernist like Clarence Major. In fact, his ruminations on his fictive aims could just have easily been spoken by Wright himself: “My heroes just try to be men; but because the white man has tried everything from the time of slavery to deny the black man his chance, his attempts to be a man will lead toward danger” (O’Brien 85). This comment implies a notion of “manhood” that comes notoriously close to what bell hooks has labeled “patriarchal masculinity,” which enshrines physical violence, a lack of expressiveness (voicelessness), and a dependence on white valorization. But notwithstanding the author’s own comments and a “plot” that superficially echoes protest fiction, Gaines ultimately centers storytelling and not plot, an aesthetic maneuver that allows him to reconfigure black masculinity by accentuating black men’s internal relationships. Thus, Gaines astutely—and deceptively, like another southern male writer-trickster, Charles Chesnutt—draws upon but subverts the discursive elements of protest in order to convey his divergence from that tradition.

Initially, the novel’s premise appears to be that black men have been historically passive, deformed figures—subjects in the sense that they have been powerless and self-effacing. Set on a Louisiana plantation in the 1940s, the action occurs at and near the black “Quarters” on the Marshall plantation. At the center of the text are a group of elderly black men who have not acted as elders: throughout their lives, the men’s collective response to white male recklessness has been recklessness; whites have committed copious acts of violence against the black men and their families, only to have encountered fear, trepidation, and silence. The galvanizing event occurs when Beau Boutan, a white Cajun with a protracted history of killing blacks, is murdered. The whites/Cajuns assume the culprit is eighty-year-old Mathu, the only black man who heretofore has challenged white male sovereignty. The old men’s historical paralysis is voiced by one of the youngsters, who mockingly declares: “Y’all [Chimley and Mat, two of the “old men”] can go and do like she [Candy Marshall, the white plantation owner who summons the old men and vows to “protect” them from the white sheriff] say or y’all can go home, lock y’all doors, and crawl under the bed like y’all used to” (28). The old men’s craveness is rooted in the same feelings of powerlessness and frustration that drove Bigger Thomas to commit ephemerally “liberating” murders. In the same vein, the outline of Gathering parallels Native Son in that white racism has extirpated the black male psyche; in that context, Beau’s murder becomes a watershed event in which the black men can either fear and flee or stand and deliver. But whereas Wright offers violence as a natural—and ultimately, destructive—response to externally eviscerating social conditions, Gaines has his characters turn inward and forces them to create constructive means for resituating themselves as subjects.

Thus, physical violence as a central component of black manhood is not necessarily displaced but is de-emphasized: as an alternative, Gaines proffers voice and community as the principle means of resisting erasure. He transports his old men through a ceremonial expiation and exorcism in which they confront and claim responsibility for their subjugation. Specifically, the characters interrupt historic deformity through the stories they tell, and the mutual confessions inaugurate their re-formation—their unification and atonement for the sins of self-erasure. To highlight the curative
function of voice, Gaines places at the center of his narrative an amalgam of stories—this in stark contrast to the “center” of Native Son, which chronicles Bigger’s debilitating “fear.” In effect, a veritable “laying on of stories” emerges as the vehicle through which Gaines challenges atavistic conceptions of black masculinity.

The most critical phase of the old men’s refashionings of self occurs at Mathu’s house in the Quarters. Candy Marshall has summoned the old men and concocted a plan to “protect” her godfather, Mathu: she orders each man to fire one shot from his gun, which would thereby complicate the identifying of the actual murderer.10 By placing a white woman in such a patronizing position, Gaines deftly problematizes notions of white patriarchal hegemony by making a white woman plantation “master.” Moreover, he deconstructs conceptions of white womanhood which played such key roles in earlier black protagonists’ conceptions of themselves: the masculinized Candy is a far cry from the ravaged Mary Dalton or even the over-sexualized white women who lust after Invisible Man. Upon arriving at Mathu’s, each old man is interrogated by the white Sheriff, Mapes. Since they have always been scared silent, Mapes assumes that he can frighten them into divulging the killer. But the old men scuttle Mapes’s inquest by claiming responsibility: “I did it” becomes a mantra, a linguistic act of resistance that each old man repeats despite Mapes’s violent responses to the phrase (he strikes each old man in the mouth after it is uttered). Because the old men’s self-imposed silences have reverberated throughout the Quarters, their verbal declarations are liberating speech acts that demonstrate their transformation from objects to subjects. In fact, Mathu’s house becomes the site of the ritual and reciprocal confessions, performances which are the cornerstone of the text.

The most polyphonic section of the novel is entitled “Joseph Seaberry aka Rufe”; each section of the multivoiced novel is headed by the narrator’s formal name (some, such as George Eliot, being distinct references to whites) followed by one the black community has bestowed, which recalls Toni Morrison’s black characters’ perpetual naming and renaming in Song of Solomon (1977). In this pivotal section the old men begin to lift their individual and collective voices, thus reiterating the centrality of communal voice in Gaines’ reconceptualization of black male subjectivity. One particularly revelatory exchange epitomizes how the gathering abrogates a heretofore inviolable white patriarchy represented not only by the Boutans, who have ruthlessly murdered scores of blacks, but by Mapes,11 the prototypic “southern sheriff” who countenances white-on-black violence:

“Till today,” Dirty Red said. He looked up at Mapes, with his head cocked a little to the side to keep the smoke out of his eyes. “Today, I—” You trying to cut in on me when I’m talking to you, Mapes asked him? Look like he’s doing more than just trying, Johnny Paul said, from the other side of Mapes. (87, emphasis added)

This verbal joust demonstrates the old men reclaiming their voices, as their verbal interruption of and signification on Mapes parallel their disruption of the heretofore self-erasing relationship with the white community. The phrase “cut in,” which connotes linguistic interference as well as violence, bespeaks the severity of the old
men’s verbal uprising. While critics of black women’s writing have delineated “sass” as a uniquely female mode of self-protection and resistance,12 I would challenge that it is a solely distaff domain: indeed, sass becomes a vehicle for black men’s resituating themselves as subjects, a way to counter a legacy of abuse, be it verbal or physical. This encounter also presages the central storytelling ritual, where multiple confessions mark the birth of a plurivocal13 speech community.

The stories the old men now feel empowered to share have a healing impact, engendering a shift from de-formed object to re-formed subject. Through a Morissonian process of “re-memory,” the old men revisit their tortured racial past and expiate for it within a collectivity of nurturing black people, primarily black men. Marking this transformation from voiceless to voiced, Gaines inscribes a reservoir of stories, where one flows directly into another: Tucker laments how the Boutan family (led by the patriarch, Fix), murdered his brother Silas, who had challenged and defeated the tractor-owning Boutans in a plowing race; this tale sparks Yank’s remembrance of how mechanization rendered his horse-breaking skills obsolete; this recollection prompts Gable’s harrowing account of his sixteen-year-old son’s execution “on the word of a poor white trash” girl; and World War One veteran Coot recalls his demoralization after whites forced him to remove his uniform because “they didn’t cotton to no nigger wearing no medals for killing white folks” (93–106). In this section Gaines centers the imperative of excavating one’s own personal and collective history as a form of speaking one’s self into existence and, concomitantly, renegotiating the conditions of one’s subject status.

Cumulatively, these speech utterances constitute a ritual exorcism, a negation of whites’ historic mutilation of the black self. More significantly, the old men’s voices form the matrix of a gendered community of testifiers and witnesses. By imbuing storytelling and storylistening with the power to revitalize the old men, Gaines gainsays the belief that the basis of subjectivity is individual; contrapuntally, the text valorizes the assertion of a collective voice by men who had heretofore been unequivocally de-voiced. In further contradistinction to protest discourse, Gaines focuses on black men’s centering and corroborating of each other’s experiences. Recall Bigger Thomas’s “confession” in which Boris Max solicits the roots of the black boy’s psychic malaise and disintegration. Bigger then assails America’s unwillingness to allow him to construct himself as a gendered subject via the accoutrements of white masculinity—the prototypical construction of masculinity that exalts materialism, isolation, and violence. Subsequently, Max vows to “witness for Bigger Thomas,” a problematic declaration in terms of both black oral tradition and Bigger’s desire for voice (348). A repository for Bigger’s black self in pain, Max not only assumes the role of “witness,” a vaunted position in the black community that involves a cosmic connection of similarly (dis)placed individuals, but his transformation of Bigger’s life into sociological treatise is yet another example of white men mediating—speaking for—black subjects. In getting the white man to listen, Wright/Bigger further legitimize a form of subjectivity that is the basis for the historic erasure of black people.

Countercontextually, Gaines embroiders a speech ritual that situates black men as the tellers and hearers, irrespective of whites’ desires either to hear or silence their stories.
One of the old men, Coot, basks in the power of voicedness, epitomizing his repositioning of himself as silent object to voiced subject:

Coot went on rocking another minute after he finished talking. He was proud of his little speech. He looked at us to see how we felt. I [Rufe] nodded to him. Couple other people nodded to him. He was proud the people had listened to him. (105)

Coot and his fellow witnesses reflect a newly formed “black expressive community,” which demands that one’s story be heard and affirmed by a group of similarly placed people; thus, Gaines concretizes the voice-community nexus. As Herman Beavers perceptively notes in his recent study on Gaines, storytelling “destabilizes the regulatory machinery that has shaped their [the old men’s] sense of possibility and becomes the vehicle that carries the old men into transgressive space” (167). Furthermore, this exchange also demonstrates the paraverbal nature of black discourse, where not just the unspeakable but the unspoken—gestures, nods, and other nonverbal signs—reflects the multidimensionality of black performance rituals and the different ways blacks “signify” or acknowledge each other that traverse speech.

Along with the affirmation of Coot’s story, one of the women, Beulah Jackson, supports another man’s testimony by forthrightly asserting “I hear him. . . . He’s making sense” (90). Though I have focused on the voice-community-subjectivity nexus in terms of black men and black men’s literary discourse, I would be remiss in downplaying the role of women in the male speech community Gaines fashion. As Beulah’s response indicates, though Gaines unequivocally privileges men’s voices in the text, he does not render women invisible and, in fact, retrieves them from the margins—another way in which he signifies on and departs from protest discourse. While the fictions of Wright and Ellison often concentrate on intra-racial sexual conflict and thereby privilege black men’s relationships with white women, Gaines elides this discursive feature not only by “de-sexualizing” white women (re: Candy the plantation “master,” not mistress), but he challenges the portrayal of black women as pawns of hegemonic institutions who contribute to the demise of black men. As a response to the histrionic Thomas women, the pathetic Bessie Mears, and the (s)mothering Mary Rambo, Gaines combats the notion that black women are thorns in the men’s collective side. Indeed, Beulah is a key witness during the storytelling episode, and even though the old men exclude all women—black and white—from their final assemblage in Mathu’s house, this act does not make Gaines and his characters sexist or misogynistic. Thus, I would agree only partially with Bonnie TuSmith’s observation that “The community initiated by these newly liberated old men—a desire to fight back is not perfect, to be sure. For one thing none of these men even considers inviting women along” (98). Clearly, Gaines’s storyworld is not utopic: the novel insists that the men’s history of self-silencing and powerlessness requires them to accept their complicity in their victimization. This does not mean that his ultimate configuration of community is phallocentric, but it is male-centered. Thus, by ascribing black men the power of sass and invective, and by making black women

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an integral part of the gendered speech community, Gaines challenges circumscribing notions of black male subjectivity: re-negotiating their position does not require black men to denigrate black women.

The act in which the old men decide whether to engage in armed struggle with the whites and Cajuns who seek retribution for Beau’s murder marks the crystallizing of the male community. When one thinks of “space” in protest discourse, Bigger Thomas’s jail or Invisible Man’s underground sanctuary comes to mind: these tombs reify the black protagonist’s status as subject—silenced and hermetically sealed. Contrapuntally, Gaines ascribes to space a curative quality, a psychologically and nurturing environment akin to Virginia Woolf’s metaphorical “room of one’s own.” Rooster describes the final “war council” at Mathu’s house thusly:

We went inside. It was dark in there, and Clatoo pulled the string to turn on the light. You could see from the way the place was kept Mathu stayed there by himself. The wallpaper his wife, Lottie, had put there, years ago was all faded and torn. Dirtdober’s nests hung on the wall and on the picture frames. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling. Mathu had a old chifforobe in one corner, an old washstand with a china bowl and a pitcher in another corner, a old brass bed sagging in the middle against the wall by the window, and a rocking chair and a bench by the firehalf. He had a coal-oil lamp on the mantelpiece, in case ‘lectricity went out. His old tin cup he used to take out in the field was on the mantelpiece, too. The old cup was so old it had turned black. Mathu stood at one end of the firehalf, Clatoo at the other end. Billy Washington caught the door, Rufe caught the window. Now it was hot and stuffy in there with the door and window both closed. (178)

In stark contrast to the asphyxiating tombs of the protest narrative, Gaines’s descriptions connote gestational images; the enclosed space is transformed into a womb, giving birth to newly constructed black male selves irrespective of age. Outwardly, Mathu’s house appears the antithesis of a fertile, regenerative milieu; in fact Rooster’s picayune details render it a rather bucolic version of the Thomas’s squalid urban tenement. But more significant than the physical dimensions and accouterments of place is the existence of a masculinized space—a hallowed site that fosters not merely physical closeness, but emotional connectedness as well.17 Gaines perspicuously challenges the idea that space functions merely as an objective correlative for black men’s psychic and cultural disjointedness. By having the old men convene indoors, he conveys that the domestic sphere is not solely the domain of women; instead it buttresses Gaines’s redefinition of black masculinity.

I have chosen not to elaborate extensively on the climactic battle between the old men and the white/Cajun vigilantes, primarily because the violent confrontation is anticlimactic in terms of the novel’s construction and the author’s reconstruction of black subjectivity. Certainly, one could argue that it was necessary for the men to attach action to their words, and, indeed, violence functions much more constructively than it does in Native Son. The death of Charlie Biggs,18 Beau’s actual killer, is

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significant because Charlie embodies the black men’s paralysis; appropriately, he
dies defending himself and the community and therefore expiates for his “emasculi-
zation.” But I believe Gaines’s construction of the novel demands that we look beyond
obvious indicators of masculinity. Instead, I think it instructive to reiterate how
Gaines’s polyphonic discourse is a narratological response to the protest poetics of his
literary predecessors.

On the surface, Gaines appropriates standard literary genres, not only the protest
novel, but also the detective novel. These modes center both violence and plot in
rather traditional ways; not surprisingly, the white characters’ primary concern in the
novel is “whodunit.” But Gaines recalls literary brother/trickster Chesnutt again in
his ability to signify and subvert. The (hi)story of black lives, not the plot of interne-
cine racial conflict, is Gaines’s fictive apparatus. Not only does he background racial
violence literally by relegating it to a mere six pages toward the end of the novel, but
he divests it of the metaphorical power to restore or destroy black men. The final
courtroom scene is a comic tour de force in which no one is convicted; the judge only
decrees that the old men be put on probation “for the next five years, or until their
deaths—whichever came first” (213). This denouement forces the reader to reevaluate
the importance of violence in black men’s construction of masculinity and to recon-
sider black men’s ability to invent creative means to reform themselves. By centering
the power of black men resituating and reclaiming their subjectivity through voice
and renewed ties to community, the author illustrates that personhood must be
negotiated on a much more perilous terrain than the battlefield: the internal terrain of
the self.

The 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C., emphasized the need for black
men to interrupt a history of social- and self-erasure through collective, communal
action. One might conjecture that the palimpsestic A Gathering of Old Men, with its
layers of black men’s histories presented within a milieu of historically and socially
linked persons, represents a fictive inscription of the March: it elucidates the impor-
tance of black men deconstructing the terms of manhood and redefining themselves
by locating a communal voice. Indeed, Gaines’s communal poetics marks a refugia-
tion of the black literary male subject, a signification upon earlier constructions of
black maleness and a demonstration of the collective power native sons can locate
within each other’s stories.

NOTES

1. I refer here to Wright’s 1937 essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” in which he outlines his
literary aesthetics.
2. See for instance Mary Ellen Doyle, “Ernest Gaines’ Materials: Place, People, Author,” and Mary
3. The plethora of recently published books such as Nathan McCall’s Makes Me Wanna Holler: A
Young Black Man in America and Sanyika Shakur’s (aka Kody Scott) Monster: The Autobiography
of an L.A. Gang Member fall squarely within the Wrightian protest tradition. These biographies
depict young black men enervated by both an oppressive white majority culture and a
dysfunctional black community; hence, Bigger Thomas’s story might be considered an ur-text
for these contemporary cautionary tales.
4. Henry Louis Gates theorizes extensively the intertextual relationships among black literary texts in *The Signifying Monkey*: “It should be clear, even from a cursory familiarity with the texts of the Afro-American tradition, that black writers read and critique texts of other black writers as an act of rhetorical self-definition” (122). About Wright and Ellison specifically, he posits, “The play of language, the Signifying(g), starts with the titles. Wright’s *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, titles connoting race, self, and presence, Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, with *invisibility* as an ironic response of absence to the would-be presence of blacks and natives, while *man* suggests a more mature and stronger status than either *son* or *boy*” (106, author’s emphasis).

5. See Robert Staples’s *Black Masculinity* for a socio-historical exegesis on black manhood, or Marcellus Blount and George Cunningham’s *Representing Black Men* for a literary-cultural exploration.

6. See Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory*, where he discusses the psychosocial development of children as “gendered subjects” from Lacanian and Freudian schools of thought (154).

7. I take this term from Peter Brooks’s *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* in which he discusses the reciprocal nature of the storyteller-storylistener relationship from a psychological perspective (50–51).

8. Tellingly, Wright entitled a 1957 non-fiction collection *White Man, Listen!*—a title which itself connotes a desire to garner a white audience which could acknowledge the depth of black despair.

9. Gates uses the term “speakerly text” to describe Zora Neale Hurston’s narrative strategies in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where she attempts to collapse the distinction between writing and speaking.

10. Writing about Candy Marshall’s role in the old men’s revolt, Sandra Shannon asserts that Candy is “the embodiment of the well-meaning but ineffectual white liberal who, though essentially benevolent, is in fact a deterrent to the cause of freedom” (207).

11. I am indebted to the reading of a colleague and friend, Hilary Holladay, who suggested the auditory connection between “Mapes and ‘rapes.” Certainly, Mapes epitomizes historical southern white male authority figures (for instance, “Bull” Connor in Alabama) who have categorically “raped” the black community in both real and figurative terms.

12. Joanne Braxton constructs a paradigm detailing the importance of sass and invective in early African-American women’s literary discourse, specifically in texts such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

13. I take the term “plurivocal” from Portelli’s *The Text and the Voice*.

14. Baker writes of the emergence of the “black expressive community” as a creative and curative response to whites’ attempts to erase black personhood (154).

15. In “Reading Family Matters” Deborah McDowell admonishes several black male critics who have attacked Morrison, Walker, *et al.* for “negative” portrayals of black men while myopically canonizing Wright despite the misogynistic underpinnings of his work. McDowell posits that there is a “critical double standard that glosses over the representation of violence, rape, and battering in Richard Wright’s work and installs him in a ‘family portrait’ of black writers, but highlights that representation in *The Bluest Eye, The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and *The Color Purple* to justify ‘disinheritance’” (80).

16. Trudier Harris provides a comprehensive examination of Wright’s “female trouble” in her essay “Native Sons and Foreign Daughters.”

17. Though it does not examine Gaine’s works in great detail, Michael Cooke’s *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy* is a seminal study on issues such as intimacy, community, and kinship in black literature.

18. Herman Beavers notes that the name Charlie Biggs is a “play on Wright’s Bigger perhaps” (171–72).

**WORKS CITED**


